DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 048 CS 010 825

AUTHOR Sullivan, Jane
TITLE Should the U.S. Have a National Reading/Language Arts Curriculum?
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College Reading Association (Crystal City, VA, October 31-November 3, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Leadership; *Language Arts; *National Programs; *Reading
IDENTIFIERS *National Curriculum; *Standardized Curriculum

ABSTRACT

Since the United States has National Goals for Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress, a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a "National Initiative" in reading and the language arts, a National Commission on Excellence in Education, why not have a National Curriculum? Two questions arise: (1) does the United States need a national curriculum? and (2) can it be pulled off? If educational trends and power brokers are to be believed, then the answer is, yes, a national curriculum is needed. However, it can only be pulled off if the impossible is to be believed. There would be positive and negative results. Positive results include uniformity of standards, less confusion among a mobile population, alignment among teacher education requirements, assessment, and curriculum goals. Negatives include too much top-down management, an overstuffed agenda, and a stifling of creativity and innovation. In the end, there is no clear "yes" or "no" answer. Reading educators must insure that any educational reform reflects what is best for students; that the reformers avoid a top-down approach that ignores input from classroom teachers, from curriculum and reading supervisors, from teacher educators; and that if there is to be a national curriculum, it must be one that works. (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Jane Sullivan

SHOULD THE U.S. HAVE A NATIONAL READING/LANGUAGE ARTS CURRICULUM?

ED341048

I. ABSTRACT

Today we have National Goals for Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress, a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a "National Initiative" in reading and the language arts, a National Commission on Excellence in Education. Why not then a "National Curriculum? To decide, we need first ask: do we *need* a National Curriculum? Second, can we pull it off? If we are to believe in the trends, then the answer we seek for the first question comes from the power brokers. "Yes, we do need a national curriculum." At least, that is what we are told. Can we pull it off? We can if we believe the impossible. What will be the results of a national curriculum? There will be positive results--uniformity of standards, less confusion among our mobile population, alignment among teacher education requirements, assessment, and curriculum goals. But there could also be negatives: too much top-down management, a overstuffed agenda, a stifling of creativity and innovation. In the end there is no "Yes, we should" or "No, we should not have a national curriculum in reading and the language arts." The decision may already have been made. What we, as reading educators, must do is to insure that any educational reform reflect what is best for students; that the reformers avoid a top-down approach that ignores input from classroom teachers, from curriculum and reading supervisors, from teacher educators; that if there is to be a national curriculum, it is one that works!

CS010835

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jane Sullivan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

II. TEXT

Should the U.S. Have a national reading/language arts curriculum? We ought, perhaps, consider that question within the framework of today's instant, international communication, shrinking globe and system of economics that stretches across a nation's borders. Then it does not surprise us that "national" initiatives are replacing what up to now has taken place within a country's subdivisions--states, shires, or provinces. Today we have National Goals for Education, National Assessment of Educational Progress, a National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a "National Initiative" in reading and the language arts, a National Commission on Excellence in Education. Why not then a "National Curriculum?

At one time, the mere mention of the concept "National Curriculum" was as distasteful to most of us as that dose of bitter tonic we received as children. Now serious discussion among educators is taking place--some would even suggest that the cornerstone has been laid--for the adoption of a national curriculum. Addressing the question *Should the U.S. Have* (future tense implied) *a National Reading/Language Arts Curriculum?* may be locking a barn door on the morning after. For our purposes, however, let us suppose that the die has not yet been cast, that the yes/no option is still available. To reach a rational decision on this all-important topic, we need first ask: do we *need* a National Curriculum? The logical second question then becomes, "Can we pull it off?"

Let us spend some time exploring the first question: Do we *need* a national curriculum in reading and the language arts. President Bush and the governors think so. They believe that something like a national curriculum is needed to stem "the rising tide of mediocrity" deplored in the report "A Nation at Risk". At the Education Summit" held at the University of Virginia,

in 1989, they stated (Fiske, 1989) "Something more, and different is needed. Simply more of the same will not achieve the results we need. ... We must find ways to deploy the resources [for education] more effectively. ...The American people are ready for radical reforms." The president and the governors went so far as to push for national education goals and annual report cards.

These recommendations came as no revelation. For some time now education in the United States has been traveling in the direction of uniformity of goals in much the same way that fallen leaves in a river follow the current downstream. It is today's trend. In the Educational Summit's plan to restructure our educational system, for instance, the first step that emerged (Fiske, 1989) was "to build a broad-based consensus around a defined set of national education goals." There are other movements toward nationalization that exist. We can sense it in the agenda of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and its plan to offer Professional certification, (which by the way is intended to complement, not replace, state licensing procedures). In the words of their report (1991), "the potential of the National Board to serve as a catalyst to improve the schools is not difficult to imagine." Elsewhere in the report, the authors state "the very existence of a National Board suggests common standards that prevail across teaching's many settings." And while the Board admits that "the challenge of balancing the need for standardization against the influence of context [i.e., local needs] is an issue the National Board must resolve in the developmental process ahead", the implication in that resolution is that the emphasis will be more on uniformity than on diversity. If we are to believe in the trends, then the answer we seek comes from the power brokers. "Yes, we do need a national curriculum." At least, that is what we are told. It would also appear that these same

experts believe that the answer to the second, and equally important question "Can we do it? is "But, of course."

In *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice complained to the Queen, "there's no use trying; one can't believe impossible things.", the Queen's response was "I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." For the sake of argument, let us agree that, like Alice, we practice believing the impossible, let us say that the answer to both questions: Do we need it? and Can we do it? is a resounding yes.

This brings us to yet another question. If indeed, we believe the impossible even before breakfast, i.e. a do-able national curriculum in reading/language arts, what is it that we are believing? Designing a National Curriculum will go beyond mere goal setting. According to John Lofty (1990), The British Education Reform Act mandated a broad and balanced curriculum, defined the "core subjects" (English, Math and Science) and the foundation subjects (technology, history, geography, music art and phys ed), required a modern foreign language for all students 11-16, required assessment at key stages, and set forth "attainment targets" that specify the essential components of the curriculum.

Is this what we are saying will happen if we adopt a national curriculum? I would suggest, most likely. Suppose like Alice, we were to practice believing the impossible. That permits us to imagine a national curriculum already in place. It also allows us the luxury of skipping to the results of such an adoption. Doing that, we can consider: If all states were required to follow the same reading curriculum, wouldn't the following results be likely to occur?

1. States, and the school districts within those states, reluctant to make necessary

changes in their reading curriculum will be pulled into the mainstream. In *Smart Schools, Smart Kids*, (1991), Edward Fiske offers his explanation as to why the reforms of the 1980s did not work. "We have been asking a nineteenth century institution to educate people for life in the twenty-first century." He states. "We need a whole new approach to designing and running schools", Now wouldn't a national curriculum provide that for us?

2. The concept of a National Curriculum fits well with other national movements: national assessment, national certification for teachers, national accreditation. Teacher education, for example, has long followed a national mode. NCATE provides us with guidelines for national accreditation and, as a member of NCATE, IRA makes major contributions to the shaping of teacher education throughout the U.S. According to Reading Today, (1991), "a growing number of states are using the IRA guidelines as they coordinate their own accreditation programs with NCATE." It would certainly make our jobs as teacher educators much simpler if we were developing in future teachers those skills that would parallel reading curricula in whatever classroom they find themselves--different states as well as different school districts. A National Curriculum, built along the IRA guidelines, would certainly assure such coordination. With the adoption of a national curriculum, along with the means of assessing student progress, everything could be listed in neat columns that insure uniformity throughout our educational system.

3. How it would simplify life for both student and teacher in today's incredibly

mobile society. Wouldn't it ease the transition if, when the Joneses picked up and moved from New Jersey to Texas, they would discover in their new school a familiar curriculum in reading? Mrs. Jones the teacher or Johnnie Jones the student would fit so much more comfortably into the new setting.

4. Citizens here would probably react as they did in Britain. British parents, according to at least one report, (Davies, 1991), welcomed the guarantee of "breadth and balance" in the curriculum, the introduction of clear expectations according to age and ability, and the reduction of the lottery element in choosing a school. Teachers welcomed the structured approach, the clearer progression and continuity between phases, the improved communication between teachers and students, school and school, school and parents."

It surely sounds like the impossible is worth a try. But there are always two sides to a coin and two scenarios to a what if. Might there be some negatives in this paradise of uniform goals, uniform curricula, uniform testing?

1. Don't you find yourself becoming extremely uncomfortable with top-down management. Isn't it true that somehow five new bureaucrats always seem to appear for every drone in the hive we call government. I sense the strong possibility that a bureaucrat will have the last say-so of what teachers need to teach down to the smallest detail. Even a cursory review of the literature on the British National Curriculum, confirms that suspicion. British teachers have raised serious concerns about the content they must teach. As one critic puts it (Barton, 1991) "the sanctuary of the classroom is being dismantled." Another (Daw, 1991)

complains of "overcrowded curriculum," "lack of communication between working groups," etc, etc. He bemoans the "impact it [the National Curriculum in English] has had on some teachers, sapping already low morale and self-esteem in some; misdirecting industriousness in others who have tried to make the unworkable work..." It is true that, in defense of the reform, Martin R. Davies, who by the way was quoted earlier as reporting all those positive responses from teachers and parents, states "what was feared as a straitjacket and a threat to cherished professional ideals has been recognized as a stimulus for curriculum debate and an opportunity to win back public and political confidence." Kind words--but Mr. Davies is the former Director of the National Curriculum council in Northumberland, England. Might he have been wearing rose-colored glasses?

2. As a reading specialist, I have grave concerns that reading instruction will not be given its due in the curriculum. I noted that "English" was the "core subject" in the British National Curriculum. Reading becomes one of the three "profile components"--speaking/listening; reading; writing. Although the drafters of the curriculum state that students will achieve outcomes beyond those stated in the "attainment targets", John Lofty, who reviewed the British National Curriculum carefully, feels that, given the comprehensiveness of the curriculum, the *stated targets* may not even be met. The British curriculum sets reading apart from writing; and further, separates composing from what one critic calls "secretarial functions". The fear is that the "clamor for grammar" will set aside the process approach to writing--and I may add, reading instruction. But that is Britain, this

is America you say? Explain then why the National Board of Standards has decided not to include a certification in reading among the first thirty-two planned. Instead, you will find reading listed under "Language Arts."

3. In *Smart Schools, Smart Kids*, mentioned earlier, the authors describe a "quiet revolution that is slowly transforming American education." In their book, they take us through a journey that describes innovative programs in nine different states. Their premise is that top-down governance, passion for standardization, inflexible sense of time, can no longer serve the country's educational needs. But isn't that exactly what a National Curriculum is likely to do? The success stories the authors describe came about because districts were allowed to be innovative. Even the National Initiative in Literacy that is being adopted across the country emerged from the California Initiative. Bernice Cullinan (1989) describes the National Reading Initiative as one where "there is no set orthodoxy, no set of materials, no single plan. The NRI involves diverse groups working in multiple ways to promote reading." Would a National Curriculum allow this to happen? Would it stifle the creativity, the grass-roots changes that have, for so long, characterized our educational system?

In conclusion, I cannot say definitively "Yes, we should" or "No, we should not have a national curriculum in reading and the language arts." I honestly believe that the answer has already been decided. Perhaps we should be asking a different question. What should we, as reading educators, do to insure:

(1) that any educational reform reflect what is best for students;

(2) that the reformers avoid a top-down approach that ignores input from classroom teachers, from curriculum and reading supervisors, from teacher educators;

(3) that if there is to be a national curriculum, it is one that works!

REFERENCES

____ (1991). Association guidelines help shape teacher education in the United States. *Reading Today*, V. 9 n. 1 Aug/Sept, p. 36.

___ (1991). *Toward High and Rigorous Standards for the Teaching Profession, 3rd Edition*, Washington, D.C.: National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Barton, Geoff. (1991). Goodbye to all that: The National Curriculum Arrives, *Use of English*, v. 42, n. 1, p. 39-45.

Cullinan, B. (1989). The National Reading Initiative and its inspiration, the California Reading Initiative, *New Advocate*, V. 2, n. 2 Spring, p. 105-113.

Davies, M. (1991). The English National Curriculum: A landmark in educational reform, *Educational Leadership*, v. 48, n.5, p. 28-29.

Daw, Peter (1991). Tragical-comical or Comical-tragical? 'English in the National Curriculum': The Adviser's view, *Use of English*, v. 42, n. 1, p 5-15.

Fiske, E. (1989). Paying attention to the schools is a national mission now, *The New York Times*, Oct 1, sec 4, p. 1.

Fiske, E. (1991). *Smart Schools, Smart Kids*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lofty, J. (1990). Coming home to the National Curriculum, *English Education*, v. 22, n. 4, p. 241-264.